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10 November 1984ALEXANDER COCKBURN**The Gelb Affair**

The Times is becoming so freighted with conflicts of interest, actual or potential, that I'm surprised it doesn't just run a disclaimer notice in place of the editorials. The most obvious example in recent days has been the paper's continued use of Claire Sterling as a reporter of the circumstances surrounding the attempt on the Pope's life.

As disturbing as the use of Sterling is the case of Leslie Gelb, national security correspondent for *The Times*. Gelb worked in the Pentagon (where he supervised the compiling of the Pentagon papers) before removing to the Brookings Institution and thence to *The Times*, where he served as national security correspondent before joining Cyrus Vance's State Department as director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs. His place at the newspaper was taken by Richard Burt, who later, with Reagan, assumed Gelb's old position at the State Department. Gelb returned to his job at *The Times* after a stint at the Carnegie Endowment.

On October 23, Walter Pincus, who covers the national security beat for *The Washington Post*, disclosed a recent study undertaken by the Center for Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School, which revealed that in 1978 Gelb helped set up a covert C.I.A. program to influence the European press to write approvingly about the neutron bomb. The program was designed to cause "U.S. sympathizers and agents in the European press to give more favorable press coverage to the bomb, either for money or for free." The Harvard study said that the program had been suggested in two State Department memorandums written in January 1978. One, by Gelb, was titled "Proposal for Action in Response to Soviet Anti-Neutron Bomb Campaign," and the other, by Gelb and George Vest (then Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs, the post now occupied by Richard Burt), was called "Covert Action to Counter International Anti-Neutron Bomb Forum."

The study concludes that the covert program was undertaken and that it met with some success. European coverage of the neutron bomb changed markedly in the spring of 1978. Pincus's story quoted "one official" involved in the program as saying Gelb was "the only one who questioned" the use of covert tactics. Pincus reported that Gelb "would not comment on his role in the operation or how it turned out." Two days later *The New York Times* ran a story by Philip Taubman which was shorter than Pincus's but slightly less agreeable to Gelb. Taubman quoted the study as saying Gelb "was a leading advocate of the covert program." He cited no official to claim a more beneficent role for him. Gelb said he could not recall details of the proposals but insisted that they were intended to supplant more ambitious plans.

None of this was illegal. C.I.A. guidelines bar the agency's use of U.S. journalists; foreign hacks are considered fair

game. In 1977 *The Times* ran a long series by John Crewdson critical of ties between journalists and secret government operations. *The Times* presumably believes in an independent press in Western Europe as well as in the United States. The paper is now in the awkward position of having as one of its most prominent reporters someone who not long ago was advocating covert interference.

There are other serious problems. Gelb, today a journalist, refuses to divulge matters to which he was privy as a government official in 1978. For a servant of government this may be admirable, but what about a servant of the press? It is not as though Gelb were the gardening correspondent. His beat covers the terrain with which he was concerned when he was at the State Department. Much of his journalism since he returned to *The Times* has concerned the missiles and kindred weaponry whose virtues he was seeking to promote in 1978. There is presumably other information acquired when he was in government that he feels duty-bound not to share with his readers. But is this a seemly credential for a national security correspondent?

It depends on how one views Gelb and how realistic one cares to be about the supposedly disinterested objectivity with which a reporter approaches his beat, particularly the national security beat. As such things go, Gelb has, in the present context of *The New York Times* and particularly when measured against the scandalous performance of Richard Burt, been mostly a moderate and well-informed voice in favor of arms control, though of course he accepts the usual premises of the cold war. So a realist could make an assessment of Gelb's overall political trajectory and not grieve excessively about what he did in 1978. Those who would argue that this is shortsighted ex parte relativism should take up my demand that all national security correspondents submit to public confirmation hearings in the Senate.